



TO THE LIMIT

AN AIR CAV HUEY PILOT IN VIETNAM

BY TOM A. JOHNSON

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Review by Capt François Dufault, CD

To the Limit is a first hand account of Warrant Officer Tom A. Johnson's experience as a UH-1 Iroquois—better known as “Huey”—US Army pilot in the Vietnam War. He wrote this book with humbleness and without pretension by simply recalling the facts, as he experienced them, with some humor but mostly with a poignant realism. For example, throughout his tour, after having flown many casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) missions, he noticed that when young men are dying they mostly call out for their “momma” instead of their God.

Tom Johnson joined as a volunteer in the Army. As he puts it, he opted to fly for four years instead of marching for two as most drafted soldiers ended up serving their tour in the infantry. He served his Vietnam yearlong tour in the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion of the First Air Cavalry Division and participated in operations in the A Shau and Song Re valleys. His battalion is one of the most decorated units of the Vietnam War and the first to test the airmobile concept. They did so in the battle of the Ia Drang valley in 1965 which is described in this book as well as the movie *We Were Soldiers*. For his service in Vietnam, Tom Johnson was awarded the Distinguished

Flying Cross, the Air Medal with five Silver Leaf Clusters as well as the Bronze Star. Even though he was responsible for saving the lives of many soldiers Tom Johnson, like most of his comrades, kidded about being “nothing but glorified bus drivers.”

Timelines in war are quite different than those in peacetime. Tom Johnson graduated from flight school in May 67, arrived in Vietnam in June and was aircraft commander by August. After a few months in theatre, and within six months of earning his pilot wings, he became the unit flight safety officer. These timelines were pushed not only by the war but also by the fact that pilots were restricted to a one-year tour of duty.

The book starts with WO Johnson's first night mission as an aircraft commander. This mission is to pick-up a long range reconnaissance patrol section that urgently needs to be extracted from the An Lao Valley. Following local procedure, they get radar guidance up the initial part of the valley and wait for the radar controller's instruction to turn, in order to follow the valley's path, just before the mountains that will prevent further radar coverage thus leaving

them alone in the darkness of night with high mountains all around. For today's tactical aviator accustomed to flying with night vision goggles that kind of flying is a scary thought. Johnson presents the missions in chronological order and includes occasional flashbacks to his basic and advanced helicopter training.

Even though the technology and political context have changed substantially since the Vietnam conflict, for a line pilot flying day-to-day missions in support of the army the essence of the missions as well as life in austere field locations is still very familiar. All tactical aviators, aircrew as well as technicians, will find familiarities with their own experiences somewhere in this book.

Tom Johnson's book, *To the Limit*, will be appreciated by anyone who loved reading Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk* as well as those who have a keen interest in how the war in Vietnam was fought from an aviator's point of view.

Tom Johnson now lives in Carrolton, Georgia, with his high school sweetheart, Pat, to whom he was married before going to Vietnam. He is the president of Johnson Electric Motor Shop, JEMS Computer Systems, and JEMS Equipment Company. ■

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Review by Major Bill March

“HERE IS HELL” CANADA'S ENGAGEMENT IN SOMALIA

BY GRANT DAWSON

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Somalia! The mere mention of the country can evoke a wide variety of visceral emotions among Canadians. For some it will be the shock surrounding the death of 16-year-old Shidane Arone at the hands of Canadian soldiers. For others it will be a sense of disbelief and angst over the revelations of problems within the Canadian Forces (CF) and the Department of National Defence (DND) exposed during the well publicized Commission of Inquiry into the

Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia and its subsequent report, *Dishonoured Legacy: The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*. Finally, there are those who will remember Somalia through a sense of horror at the images of the corpse of a US serviceman being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, or with a feeling of pulse-pumping entertainment watching Hollywood's take on events through the movie *Blackhawk Down*.